under the
BONNET

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relations

shouldn't it live on?

totus consulting services (p) limited

for a cause...

ANAND CHILDREN'S HOME

TRY - To Reach You is a multi-purpose social work organisation reaching out to the socially, educationally and economically backward sections irrespective of caste, creed and religion. This organisation was started in 1996 as a tribute to a dream. When Anandkumar, a student of the Madras School of Social Work, Chennai died without realising his ambition to start a welfare organisation for the under privileged, his classmates took up the cause.

TRY's primary focus is to provide education for the underprivileged children in the society. Priority is given to the children of commercial sex workers for whom education is a dream.

TRY works on a community based method where mothers/parents and children are involved. It provides home, shelter, care and education to children who are abandoned, neglected or who belong to broken families, especially children of commercial sex workers. Realising that providing shelter, care & education to the child itself will not be a permanent solution, TRY has a comprehensive family & community based rehabilitation programme that has a direct and positive effect on the overall well-being of the child.

TRY does not wish to be a dumping ground for the socially neglected. It is an organisation where people come to solve problems and are rehabilitated to join the social mainstream and contribute as useful citizens. Deserted women and sex workers are given counselling so that they can stop their profession & find alternate occupation. It also helps them get a suitable job in various organisations.

The main aims & objectives of TRY are

❑ To promote the interests and welfare of the socially, educationally and economically backward people irrespective of caste, creed and religion on a non-profit basis.

❑ To provide substitute care for destitute and children in vulnerable conditions through custodial care, protection and maintenance.

❑ To conduct training and income generation programmes for the youth and to realise their potential and aspirations.

❑ To establish a centre for study and research on child, women, youth, old-age and community welfare.

From the time TRY was established they have made a difference to

❑ Forty two families who have been given counselling / vocational training and were rehabilitated. Helped women who were commercial sex workers find an alternate profession and thereby lead a normal life.

❑ 85 children from the underprivileged community between the age group of 3- 10 years by providing basic education, shelter and care. More importantly, by rehabilitating their mothers / parents / family, they have been successfully put back into the mainstream of social life as useful citizens.

Being a multipurpose organisation, TRY accepts children who are in need of shelter, health, care and education, without any discrimination whatsoever.

TRY can be contacted at: To Reach You, No: 13, Giri Nagar, Ramapuram, Chennai.   Phone: +91-44-22493443
Mobile: 98401-11964 Website : www.toreachyou.org

Dear Friend,

It gives me great pleasure to come back to you with the next issue of Under the Bonnet.

"Employee Relations ...shouldn't it live on?" is the theme of this issue!

"Labour, Union and Law" are the first things that come to people's minds when we mention Employee Relations. True, in the first wave of industrialisation and the age of the skilled workman, securing "Industrial Peace" and "Productivity" was the primary preoccupation and employee relations was used as an important vehicle to secure this.

In the second wave of industrialisation that we are witnessing today, our preoccupation is with securing performance and engaging with individual contributors to get them to give their best. Sadly however, we have defined this as an HR task devoid of "Employee Relations".

While the profile of the new breed of individual contributors and the way they do their work is changing significantly, we have chosen to rely more heavily on robust processes and less heavily on relationships to improve effectiveness. In doing so, we have all collectively contributed to the slow death of Employee Relations.

In this issue of UTB, we make a strong case for Employee Relations to live on, albeit in a new form!

I am also pleased to report to you that "Employment 2010", the participative search event organised by us was a grand success. In addition to providing a platform to share our research findings, it also generated new knowledge on the subject. Most importantly, it gave birth to a very new and refreshing format for the collective search for knowledge. This issue carries some highlights of the event.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue of UTB and as usual we would be delighted to hear from you at utb@totusconsulting.com .

Warm Regards and Seasons Greetings!

Ganesh Chella

Vikram* would rather forget his last Diwali ....

Vikram who joined this major software services company was posted at their Noida development centre. Around Diwali he was transferred to Chennai.

He saw his project team members receiving sweet boxes. Having waited for a day he went up to his Team Lead who promptly directed him to the HR department.

After some effort Vikram managed to establish contact with his 'HR' colleague, Arjun. Needless to say, Arjun had never seen Vikram. He quickly checked his HRIS and informed Vikram that his name was not there in the distribution list since his papers had not yet been transferred to Chennai. Feeling unhappy, Vikram tried to get counsel from his Team Lead, who recommended that he try once again. "So what if your name is not there? Ask HR to give you a box," said the Team Lead, though not offering to personally intervene and get him the box of sweets.

This was now a rightful instruction from his boss to "get the box". After a number of calls and nudges from his Team Lead, Vikram finally managed to get Arjun. Arjun was more helpful this time. He found out for Vikram that his box of sweets was actually waiting for him at Noida. "Since I do not have any intimation about your transfer, your name does not figure in the Chennai distribution list and I am sorry I cannot do anything about it."

Though in another organisation now, Vikram ponders now and then about his missing box of sweets and even now the bitterness of the sweets remains in his mind.

*_(Name changed for obvious reasons)_

We now cut over to an aspiring HR professional's campus interview.

The first question he is asked is "So, why did you choose HR?" And pat comes the reply - "I love interacting and being with people."

Well over a year thereafter, our young HR professional realises he has spent more time in front of his PC than with the elusive "people" he had dreamt of.

TARGET : ER ?
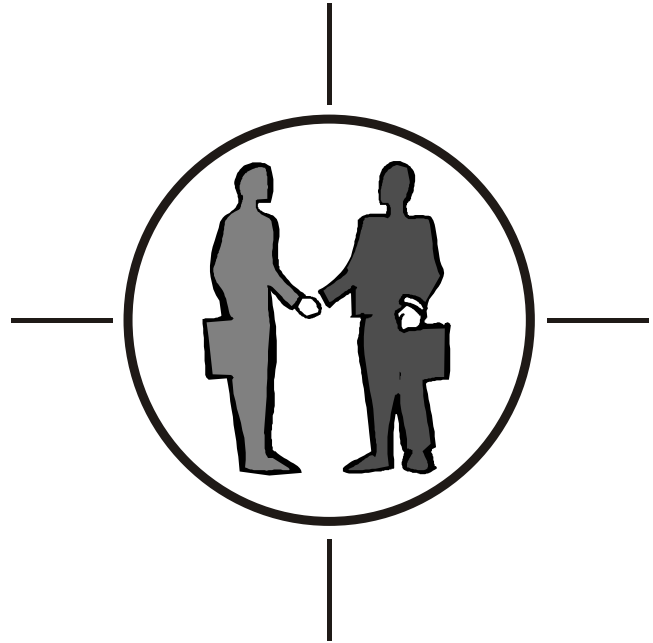
In the age of "mentafacturing" and "manufacturing", in the world of front-line services, professional services and technology services, in the world of human capital and intellectual capital, in the world of on-site and off-site work, in the world of temping and contracting, who is indeed managing Employee Relations?

In our preoccupation with process and performance, have we compromised on "relationships?" In trying to share the responsibility, have both the Line Manager and the HR Manager let Employee Relations die a slow death?

In the eagerness to shape strategy, have HR professionals dropped ER from their agenda rather than make it an integral part of their work?

Are we aware of the consequences of what we have done?

For the last time, whose job is it to manage Employee Relations - Line or HR?

And finally, what do we need to do?

These and other questions form the theme of this issue of Under the Bonnet!

Before we begin to understand the issues involved, it would be useful to get a handle on the semantics first.

By Employee Relations, we are referring to the process of engaging with the "whole employee" through a variety of "high intensity touch points" leading to a trust based "relationship" for the fulfillment of mutually beneficial goals.
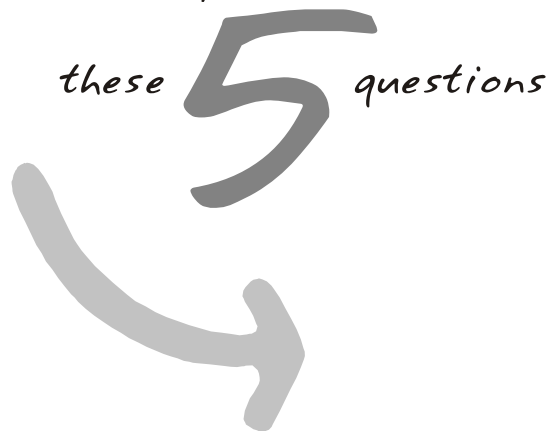
The key phrases are "whole employee" and not just in his role, "high intensity touch points" and "relationship".

The other important point to make is that when we talk about Employee Relations, we are referring to the "individual contributors" in an organisation and not to Supervisors and Managers, though they need relatedness too.

Finally, we will constantly talk about the Line Manager or the People Manager (the actual immediate Manager of the team) and HR Manager (the one charged with the responsibility for HR in the work unit) as the two key players in this situation.

To try and dimension the problem as it exists today, we need to ask ourselves five important questions:

we need to

ask & address

these **5** *questions*

Is the individual contributor alienated from HR and the Line Manager?

How did the Employee Relations function evolve?

Has HR cannibalised ER?

Is discipline and grievance redressal relevant to today's knowledge workers and other individual contributors in modern businesses?

Are Line Managers playing their part in Employee Relations?

① Is the individual contributor alienated from HR and the Line Manager?

At the root of the problem lies the acute alienation that the average individual contributor experiences with both the HR Manager and the Line Manager. This is the core of the problems and an alarming one.
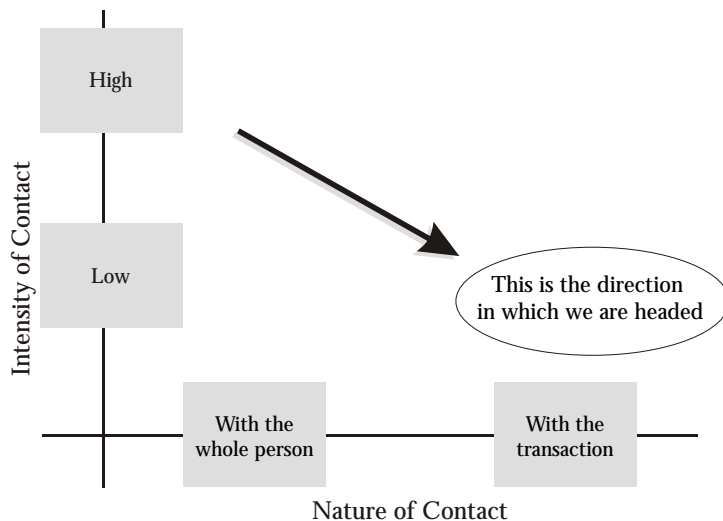
We are clearly seeing that the intensity of contact by HR and Line with the individual contributor / employee has come down significantly. We are also seeing that the nature of contact has become quite transactional.

Understanding the reasons for this alienation would be critical to dimension the problem.

The alienation exists at three distinct levels:

The Mental Alienation
For decades, most of the Line Managers and HR professionals were able to see and understand what the workman or employee actually did. Out of this understanding came appreciation and empathy.

Given the extremely high level of specialised tasks that the individual contributors have begun to perform, you really cannot see and understand many of them.

It was easier to appreciate the pressure on a teller clerk by observing the long queue in front of her desk. It is much harder

to appreciate the pressure on the same clerk in the same bank when she is processing hundreds of loan applications, data entered remote and uploaded for her to verify.

It was easier to appreciate the pressures on an employee in an assembly line in a factory or of the one moving crates and drums. It becomes harder to appreciate the pressures on an employee managing a complex process through a control panel.

It was easier to appreciate the problems employees faced in serving customers face to face. It is much harder to appreciate the pressures of employees who manage difficult customer expectations over conference calls with clients located thousands of miles away.

This is not just true for the HR Manager but also the Line Manager. Understanding effort or complexity in knowledge work is hard even for the Manager.

Understanding the socio-technical interface is fundamental to engaging in Employee Relations and today's socio-technical interface is hard to understand, at least for the ones one step removed from the task.

The Physical Alienation
Physical alienation is not a new phenomenon. Sales employees, medical representatives and project execution employees faced it all the time. The Line Manager was primarily responsible for managing the physical alienation by staying in touch and demonstrating empathy. This was of course not wide spread or an integral part of the way business was done.

The physical alienation we are talking about today is of a different kind. This is the alienation caused by employees working "on-site" whether in the same city or outside the country. It could be for true for a small employee leasing company or a large software services company.

Physical alienation certainly leads to lack of appreciation and robs the golden opportunity of establishing a relationship.

The Emotional Alienation
The emotional alienation is perhaps the hardest to deal with. HR and Line have been driving a series of significant changes in the way learning, earning and growing have been managed. These changes have been huge and quite hard to digest and live with. The dissonance caused by these changes has clearly led to emotional alienation and the flip flop state of feeling "victimised" and "persecuted".

What has led to the dissonance is the fact that the nature of contact and the intensity of contact in managing the impact of these changes have been quite low.

The five areas of change that have led to alienation worth mentioning are:

1. <u>Task standardisation:</u> The need to compete globally, the need to scale and the resultant need for process adherence has led to a high level of task standardisation in knowledge work. This change has not been easy for the employees to grapple with and adjust.

2. <u>Personal ownership for learning</u>: The disappearance of tenure and the need to "plug and play" has led to a large part of the learning responsibility falling on the employee. Organisational support is available but minimal. This shift is significant and very different from the paradigm of being taught.

3. <u>Hard performance measures:</u> Employees are now measured by hard metrics. Be it a sales person, a retail store clerk, a production employee, a call centre agent or a coder, measurement is high. High levels of measurement and a close and constant monitoring are certainly stressful and take us back to the Taylorism days.

4. <u>Differentiation and variability of Pay:</u> Employees are finding it hard to accept differentiation as a value, especially when it affects them. Variability and the fact that pay can go down when it needs to, is new and not easy to come to terms with.

5. <u>Career uncertainty</u>: The possibility of job cuts and layoffs are now more real than ever before. The impact of mergers and acquisitions are real too. Uncertainty is a huge ghost that haunts employees.

It would be fair to conclude that the alienation, caused by these fundamental changes in the very nature of work, has had a cyclical impact on Employee Relations and the ability of HR and Line to manage it.

What is sad is that the employee does not see the HR Manager and the Line Manager on his side in managing these changes. That is the Employee Relations gap we are talking about.

2 | How did the Employee Relations function evolve?

Let's now pause for a moment and take a look at how the role of Employee Relations was managed over the years.

Let's start with the Employee Relations Manager first.

He was variously referred to as Welfare Officer, Personnel Officer, Plant Personnel Manager, Employee Relations Manager and so on. Whatever the name, he was a specialist and not a generalist. He had a specific role for which he received specific training.

At the minimum he had three specific roles to perform:

1. To secure discipline and conformance to basic standards

2. To ensure that the contractual and/or legal obligations to the employees were fulfilled

3. To ensure that employee grievances were redressed

Many transcended this and did a lot more like:
- Engaging employees in productivity and quality improvement efforts
- Contributing to their education and multi-skilling
- Developing programs to link rewards to productivity gains

Relationship was the primary means through which a lot of this was achieved.

To be sure, there were at least three major checks and balances to ensure that the role was played and played well:

1. Law
2. Unions
3. The belief and style of leadership

Compliance with law was an important pre-occupation, be it working conditions or welfare or disputes or terminations. Law was an important deterrent.

The presence of Trade Unions played a significant role in ensuring that organisations did more than them to wrest the relationship with employees. The fear of Unions or the fear of Union involvement led HR and Line to act proactively.

We are not going to get into a debate about the role of unions and their usefulness today. The point is that they did influence Employee Relations.

Even in the absence of Unions, we had CEOs and business leaders who were known for their strong personal belief in people and their style of ensuring that people were well looked after. This provided the impetus for others to maintain relations with employees.

T V Sundaram Iyengar and more recently Rusi Modi were known for their employee-friendly style of management.

The situation was not without its flaws and large share of criticism. ER Managers were quite often seen as power centres and Union fixers. Many ER Managers were so preoccupied with fixing or managing the Unions that they forgot the employees too.

Many others who could not transcend the basics, keep their ears to the ground and maintain "relationships" paid dearly in the form of Unionisation.

But all in all, the fear of Unionisation, the concern to be on the right side of law and the pressures from CEOs led the ER Managers and Line Managers to get as close to employees as possible.

The situation was true not only for manufacturing organisations but also for service businesses including banks, hotels, courier companies, ports, hospitals, transport companies and so on.

All of this has had silent but significant impact on the workplace.

What was most distinctive earlier was the fact that Employee Relations was on somebody's agenda- the ER Manager, the Line Manager or the CEO.

Man-days on account of disputes came down, workers needed less and less supervision, organisations were able to bring about greater and faster change with the active cooperation of employees. And all of this at a time when the number of traditional workmen jobs were being reduced through automation and outsourcing.

What was most distinctive about the situation was the fact that Employee Relations was on somebody's agenda- the ER Manager, the Line Manager or the CEO.

What was most sensible about the situation was the right balance between "managing relationship" and "managing process".

In contrast, today all the three checks and balances are missing.

The awareness of law and its rightful interpretation continues to be a problem.

Trade Unions have almost disappeared.

Needless to say, the performance pressures on CEOs prevent them from engaging with employees proactively. More importantly, having enjoyed the freedom to hire, fire and make changes to peoples lives at will and not having seen any form of collective action, many modern CEOs are not aware of what they have and how precious it is!

3 — Has HR cannibalised ER?

At first glance, this would sound revolting. Do read on.

The best way to understand what we are trying to say is to step back and understand how the more modern function of Marketing has evolved and coexisted with the traditional Sales function.

The functions of marketing, product management, category management, market research and so on have all been focused on strengthening customer relationship and strengthening the efforts of sales. While some of these disciplines are new, they have all worked within the framework of adding value to the consumer.

Sales on the other hand is and will always be the engine of revenue and growth. It is the sales force that stays in touch with the markets, makes the customer contact and launches new products, services and solutions.

Organisations understand that no amount of strategy and no amount of branding power can compensate for the "Feet on Street". "Feet on street" is key to sale. No one ever shut down the Sales department because they could run terrific marketing campaigns!

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Arising out of this belief, good organisations always insisted that their young trainees spend their mandatory three years in the field before entering the haloed corridors of marketing. These organisations also sent their Marketing professionals back into the field periodically to regain the "feel for the consumer".

In other words, while Sales and Marketing belonged to the same function, they were recognised and managed as two distinct professions with distinct technical capability requirements.

Let's now contrast this with the evolution of HR from ER and look at whether the two have managed to coexist.

Firstly, we have not maintained the distinct identities between HR and ER roles. We have begun to see them as one profession. In fact, everyone is called an HR Manager, irrespective of what he or she does, especially in the modern businesses.

As a result, the ER part of HR is what has suffered.

The consequence of this is that even educational institutions producing professionals trained in ER have changed. Instead of adapting the ER curriculum to modern day needs, everyone has started offering "HR" under one big broad umbrella.

The next big mistake was the step motherly positioning of those who performed ER roles vis-à-vis HR. ER Managers were asked to look after workmen and HR Managers looked after white-collar employees. ER was not seen as a strategic process and HR was not seen as a relationship process.

Organisations put their best and most articulate people in HR. Very quickly, ER stopped attracting good talent.

Preoccupation with staffing, performance, quality and the like took the HR Manager away from engaging with people and focused his energies on engaging with processes. Worse, HR managers were doing this without any grounding in Employee Relations roles.

With no distinct identities between HR and ER roles, everyone is called an HR Manager, irrespective of what he or she does

Technology has only made things worse. Self-help mechanisms, help desks and touch screens were meant to free up the HR manager to spend more time with employees. Most HR heads we spoke to bemoan that this is not the case. Most HR Managers instead spend over 60% of their time in front of computers, they say. Just try asking the Head of Sales & Marketing if he is okay with his sales guy sitting in front of the computer and not visiting the field!

Some of our readers are likely to dismiss this being specific to the IT industry. It is not. Attitudinal changes towards a profession are hard wired and affect not just the most dominant user of the profession today but spread their influence to all users across all sectors.

In its eagerness to align with business and participate in executing strategy, HR not only forgot the ER role but also killed it.

The ER of today is certainly not the same as it existed decades ago but we need to realise that ER is a distinct profession and has a distinct role in today's businesses.
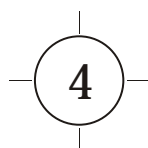
4 | Is discipline and grievance redressal relevant to today's knowledge workers and other individual contributors in modern businesses?

Another way to ask ourselves if we need an Employee Relations approach is to ask ourselves this hard question.

Our discussions with CEOs and HR heads reveal that modern businesses have much greater trouble dealing with discipline or understanding and resolving grievances than their counterparts in traditional businesses.

Let's start with discipline.
Discipline is as much a problem in an IT company, an ITES company, a bank, a hotel, a hospital and an insurance company as it is in the traditional factory that we have known of.

Individual contributors, irrespective of education levels need help with adjusting to standards of personal discipline.

We have listed the three most common issues that we have come across in our experience:

1. Tardiness- In the mistaken understanding of flexi time, many organisations are suffering the problems of employees just not turning up on time. The lack of sound relationships with employees inhibits comprehensive resolution of this malaise. Not turning up for work is also quite common.

2. Dress and personal grooming- In the mistaken belief that being unkempt fuels creativity, many organisations tolerate abysmal levels of personal hygiene and grooming. Again, these organisations have just not managed to get the message across.

3. Following work procedures and policies - From filling in time sheets to use of the internet, and from reporting problems and applying for leave in advance to acquiring skills, it is quite a struggle to get employees to follow process.

We see that discipline is indeed an issue. And managing discipline is a very important element of employee relations. Discipline does not happen through policies and regimentation. Self-discipline, the best form of discipline, happens by engaging with employees, counselling them and showing them the way in the formative years of their careers just the way it was done in the factories.

<u>Let's now look at grievances.</u>
Modern day employees have more grievances than any traditional workman. Their pride might inhibit them from raising the issue and asking for help, but it manifests itself in some way or the other and does affect work.

Despite the greatest advances in every sphere, the basic nature of employee grievances has not really changed. The typical list even today includes the following:

1. Long work hours
2. Excessive workload
3. Perception of supervisory bias and bad treatment
4. Poor quality of work
5. Inadequate pay in relation to contribution

Modern day employees have more grievances than any traditional workman. Their pride might inhibit them from raising the issue and asking for help, but it manifests itself in some way or the other and does affect work.

Grievances are an integral part of every organisation- even the best. What makes the difference is the investment made by the organisation to listen, empathise and address grievances. Like in the case of customer complaints, a grievance redressed leads to a highly satisfied employee who is now even more trusting of the employee value proposition. He knows that even if things don't work, someone cares enough to fix it.

The temps, contract labour and leased employees working for "clients", the direct sales agents who sell client products, the onsite employees in technology companies and so on are quite often the most aggrieved. The user of their services has no time for them. Their employers have limited say over what they do, how they do it and most importantly how they are treated.

Understanding grievances and acting on them is one of the most important dimensions of employee relations. To do this however, one needs to stay in touch, have their ears to the ground and demonstrate real empathy.

Having said this, there are excellent examples of organisations across industries that have been able to instill exemplary levels of discipline and also demonstrated a high degree of sensitivity to address employee grievances. Employees "vote with their feet" by seeking out such organisations. It is not the quality of HR systems but the ER process that finally makes the difference.
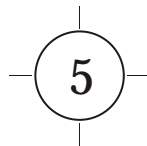
(5) Are Line Managers playing their part in Employee Relations?

This is perhaps the most contentious and difficult issue to resolve.

All modern Employee Relations Managers, CEOs and experts have held that the People Manager or Line Manager is best qualified and positioned to manage Employee Relations.

Our experience is that this is not happening. Three questions beg answers here.

Do Line Managers have the skill?

To what extent have today's organisations prepared their Line Managers to perform people management responsibilities? The answer - Virtually no preparation!

Either over-promoted, or promoted for technical abilities, many Line Managers just do not have the skills in performing people management tasks right from selection of employees to taking corrective action.

Lack of preparation to do these tasks creates stress and resentment and it shows in the quality of employee relations demonstrated. Our belief is that it is not intentional. It is just lack of skill. It is also the lack of excitement created around the role.

The situation is true in traditional and modern businesses. An unprepared Manager can spell disaster in the team he has to manage.

There are of course some exemplary examples of organisations that have a year long road map for prospective Line Managers to acquire and demonstrate the desired skills.

Do Line Managers have the time?

This is much harder to say. There is widespread belief that managerial span of control is increasing. It is of course common knowledge that the pressure to do the numbers is also ever increasing. In the end, in the battle between task and people, task has turned out the winner.

Either over-promoted, or promoted for technical abilities, many Line Managers just do not have the skills in performing people management tasks...

Today's manager just does not have the time for Employee Relations. His knowledge about his people is fairly limited. His knowledge about what is on their mind is even more limited. Should he make the time? Absolutely yes.

Is HR not supposed to help the Line Manager in this?

Much of the above could be overcome if the quality of relationship between Line Managers and HR was strong. Unfortunately it isn't.

What ails the relationship?

One aspect of the problem is the conflicts in expectations. Line Managers want operational excellence and many HR Managers hate the routine and the line accountability.

Line Managers are limited in their ability to place qualitative expectations and many HR Managers are limited in their ability to influence change or market their initiatives.

The other more serious problem is of trust and credibility. HR Managers quite often lack the skill to raise issues, present data about people problems or just practice constructive employee advocacy. Overreacting or carrying information to the next level leads to breach of trust and breakdown of relationships.
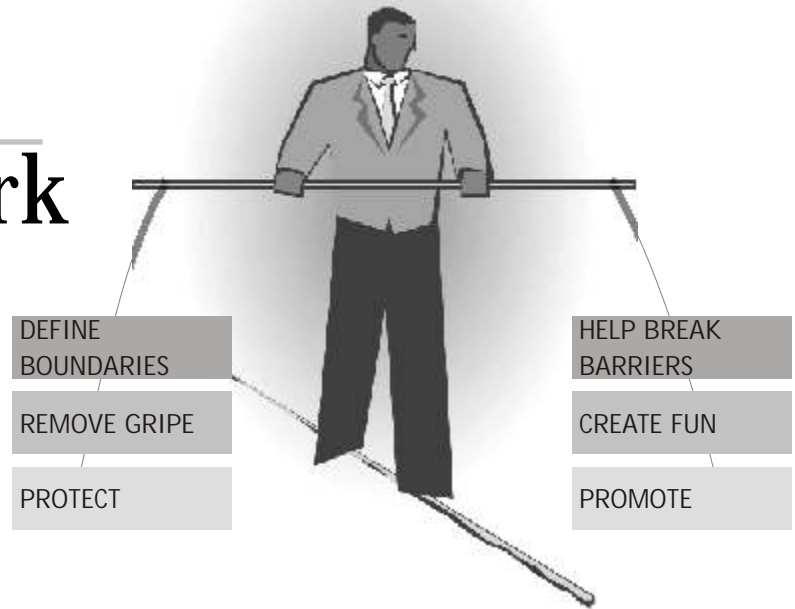
Skills in diagnosis, facilitation, conflict resolution and persuasion are critical and come with much practice.

Basically the primacy of the relationship is between the employee and the Manager. HR has to play a good midwife role.

Here the leadership in the organisation can play a very important role in giving HR the legitimacy in playing this role. GE is quite often quoted as one organisation that has succeeded in giving HR this legitimate role.

if you hire me to bark at your employees, that will free you for more important things

The ER Framework

DEFINE BOUNDARIES

REMOVE GRIPE

PROTECT

HELP BREAK BARRIERS

CREATE FUN

PROMOTE

Balanced Employee Relationship

Having read this far, you might be impatient now for that ideal ER role or framework.

We will attempt to present a simple framework that captures the essence of what we are trying to say. We call it the Balanced Employee Relationship.

Life revolves around striking the right balance in everything. Work and life, Finances, Organisational goals. Everything needs balance.

Relationship with employees needs balance too. Balancing between two seemingly conflicting demands but actually two ends of the same continuum.


DEFINE BOUNDARIES

HELP BREAK BARRIERS
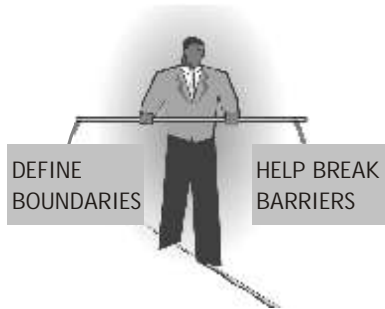
Securing discipline is an important part of the Employee Relations role. Be it a retail store, a call centre, a hotel, a hospital or factory, the first step in securing discipline is to communicate standards and support its compliance. The next is to ensure that managers are leading by example!

Boundaries need to be created with care. Boundaries must be purposeful. But boundaries are needed. Organisations use processes to instill discipline. Others create pride around conformance. In some other, the CEO sets the example. The CEO swiping his card makes it cool for others to follow. The Factory manager being frisked makes it ok for others to be frisked.

Employee Relations can play a huge role in making this happen.

We cannot however stop here. Employee Relations can engage employees in bringing out their best, in involving them in solving problems, in encouraging them to take ownership for organisational initiatives outside their work.

Balance is important because we cannot overdo one at the cost of the other. In the eighties, many factories embraced participative management styles when the basic boundaries were being violated and the movement failed.

REMOVE GRIPE — CREATE FUN

PROTECT — PROMOTE
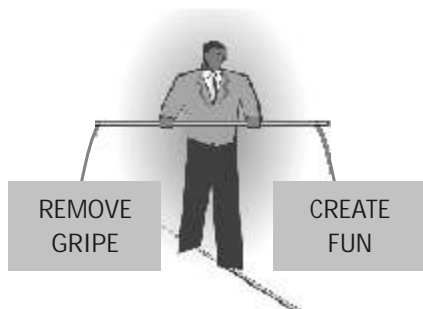
Employees have grievances that need to be heard and resolved. Unresolved grievances make employees cynical and bad ambassadors for the organisation.

In today's free world, employees speak to the Press, send mails and post messages in chat rooms.

Employee surveys, communication sessions, grievance redressal processes and open houses are key Employee Relations tools that need to be used effectively.

The ER Manager must be equipped with the skills to use this information and work constructively with Line Managers to find solutions.

Employees are reasonable and do not expect all their grievances to be resolved. They certainly expect to be heard.

In many employee workouts, the issues that employees are most emotional about are actually the least important to them. They just want to make a point.

It is equally important to create a climate of fun. Here it is important to emphasise that fun does not translate into parties, picnics, TGIFs, off-sites, birthday cards and so on. These are small aspects of fun. Fun comes out of doing quality work, enjoying colleagueship, celebrating and just playing.

Again, balance is important. Spending millions on fun, when fundamental grievances are unresolved is of no use. This is the ER challenge.
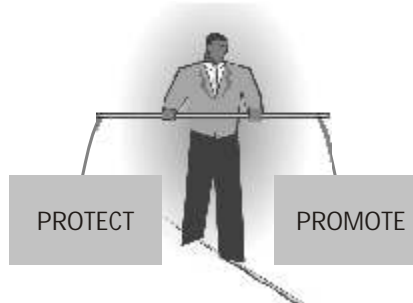
The most fundamental task is to ensure that the employer fulfills the legal and contractual obligations in all his dealings with employees. ER is responsible for securing this.

In this day and age when layoffs are so common, ER skills are critical in managing layoffs with grace and in accordance with what is contractually right.

This holds true for even simple things like leave, long work hours, changes in working conditions, reallocation of duties and so on.

Salary deferrals will become common. So too will be salary reductions.

Dignity and privacy are also fundamental rights. Organisations need to be sensitive to issues of harassment, violation of privacy and so on.

Employees perceive these as contractual obligations. When these are not available for various reasons, employees need to be carried along in terms of being told why, their self-worth needs to be protected and their feeling of safety secured.

A sensitive Employee Relations approach will go a long way in preserving this.

At the other end, we need to ensure that we promote meritocracy, performance and potential in every way. Employees must be helped to come to grips with organisational realities and exigencies as long as their long-term interests are protected.

If organisations once considered "best employers" are suddenly badgered by their own employees and the Press, it does not suddenly make the organisation bad. In fact we think it is quite unfair and irresponsible to do so. It is only a reflection of organisational imbalance and can be set right only through an Employee Relations approach.

Balance again is the key.

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Dave Ulrich on "Becoming an Employee Champion"

Over 7 years ago, Dave Ulrich recognised the need to foster the 'Employee Champion', one of the four key roles he advocated to the HR professional.

In his book titled "Human Resource Champions", Dave Ulrich says that "HR professionals have mistakenly defined business partnership as merely having a strategic orientation, not recognizing the importance of working with and for employee contribution."

"Employee contribution becomes a critical business issue, because in trying to produce more output with less employee input, companies have no choice but to try to engage not only the body, but the mind and soul of every employee. If no one hears the voice of the employee, the voice may be silenced, to the detriment of the business" says Dave Ulrich.

Dave Ulrich also introduces the term "Employee Depression" and says that it has an underlying cause- "Employees feel that the demands made on them exceed the resources made available to them. They feel that they are being asked to do more than they have the resources to accomplish". He adds "HR professionals should be early observers of the symptoms of employee depression during employee contacts, exit interviews, employee surveys and employee relations activities."

Dave Ulrich goes on to say that "HR professionals who guarantee employee contribution should be the observers, champions and sponsors of balanced resources and demands, for both themselves and for the clients and employees they serve". The demand/resource and employee contribution challenge has three possible solutions.
- Reducing work demands by setting priorities, moving towards focused goals and reengineering processes
- Increasing resources by empowering employees, establishing a common vision, transforming the routine to challenges, building collaboration amongst employees; bringing about a culture of fun in the work setting, sharing business gains, increasing employee communication, improving technology and lastly building employee competence through training and development.
- Turning demands into resources by using exit interview findings, understanding the expectations of new managers and involving employees in decisions they need to be a part of.

Dave Ulrich holds the view that "to become an employee champion, HR professionals must demonstrate to employees the confidence and trust of ministers, the sensitivity of psychologists, the creativity of artists and the discipline of pilots."

He further says, "Line Managers should pay attention to employees' needs and ensure employee contribution through activities such as the following:
- Articulating a new employee contract for all employees within the business
- Setting stretch goals, but supplying the resources that make it possible to reach those goals
- Reinvesting in employee contribution"

He adds "HR professionals complement the Line Manager's work by undertaking the following tasks:
- Being the employees' voice in management discussions
- Assuring employees that their concerns are being heard
- Defining and providing resources that help employees meet the demands made on them"

In conclusion, Dave Ulrich says, "These activities will help employees to contribute more fully because they will have the competence to do a good job and the commitment to do it right."

What are the
ER Capabilities?

Defining boundaries or helping break barriers, removing gripe or creating fun, protecting or promoting; every HR Manager and Line Manager needs to demonstrate three simple yet powerful personal capability themes to perform these tasks well.

Informing, Communicating and Counselling

Managers must be able to engage in open communication with employees. They must be able to do a lot of it and all the time.

Many CEOs take me aside and ask me why employees don't speak up in Open Houses that they so religiously call for.

I tell them that employees don't have adequate evidence that the house is indeed so open. If the CEO has never ever gone around anytime before and established personal contact with at least 30% of the employees, how will they ever trust him and open their mouths.

On the other hand, if at least a third of the employees know him as a person, they will speak up.

Also, open houses need to be structured around themes and cannot be completely open. Finally, HR Managers need to be familiar with facilitating large group search interventions to make such gatherings interactive.

Empathising, Listening and Sensing

We need to bring the humanness back to the workplace. Managers need to make the effort to listen to what employees have to say. The ability to sense employee feelings about specific issues are also important.
We can sense and pick up issues if we walk around and meet employees. We can empathise with them if we do what they do.

Auditing, Advocating and Escalating

This is especially important for HR Managers. HR must make the effort to find out if things are not working well.

HR must also take the effort and courage to advocate on behalf of employees and escalate to the highest levels if things don't improve.

HR must act as the spokesperson and Union representative of employees.

Why is it important today to remember and engage in the ER role?

India is on the threshold of major opportunities. For the first time, we are seeing the prospect of significant number of jobs being created in multiple sectors - manufacturing, technology, infrastructure, services and so on.

A large part of this workforce will be young first entrants to the world of work.

A large number of these jobs are far more demanding than what we have ever seen or experienced. Many of these jobs have come and will come at the cost of unemployment for people in other countries.

In other words, the stakes are high and we must get it right this time.

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Deming and Employee Relations

Bert Peterson, a consultant with many years of Human Resource Consulting experience,has closely studied the Employee Relations implications of the Deming Quality Principles and concludes that
" The Deming Method is Heavily Weighted Towards Employee Relations".

He argues that the Deming Method is in fact heavily weighted towards the "softer" functions in a company. Of his fourteen points - seven are very much Employee Relations oriented he contends:

Point 6   - Institute Training

Point 7   - Institute Leadership

Point 8   - Drive Out Fear

Point 9   - Break Down Barriers Between Staff Areas

Point 10 - Eliminate Slogans, Exhortations, and targets for the Work force

Point 12 - Remove Barriers to Pride of Workmanship

Point 13 - Institute a Vigorous Program of Education and Retraining

He also points out that of the Seven Deadly Sins - three involve employee relations:

Sin 3 - Evaluation by Performance, Merit Rating or Annual Review of Performance
Sin 4 - Mobility of Management
Sin 6 - Excessive Medical Costs

A look at Point 12, of Dr. Deming's 14 Points, gives a pretty good summary of how Dr. Deming viewed workers. It states:

"Remove barriers to pride of workmanship. People are eager to do a good job and distressed when they can't. Too often, misguided supervisors, faulty equipment, and defective materials stand in the way. These barriers must be removed."

Basically Dr Deming seems to believe that the workman has not changed at all. He believes that he is still a craftsman who wants to take pride in what he does and produce quality work.

Source: A DEMING VIEW OF EMPLOYEE RELATIONS-An Essay Discussing the Role of Employee Relations in American Quality Efforts by Bert Peterson

Being process oriented and focusing on quality is one part of the solution. Being customer oriented is another part of the solution.

Being employee oriented is actually the biggest part of the solution.

For one, Employee Relations can prevent attrition for the employable and avoid the need for Unions for those unemployable readily.

Sound ER can create a climate of trust and remove cynicism amongst employees that their voice is never heard.

Most importantly, good ER can help employees give their 100%.

How do we establish an Employee Relations culture?

The message is loud and simple. While Human Resources as a function and profession has many tasks and challenges, we need to make Employee Relations an integral part of the Human Resource Management framework. ER must be a part of the HR strategic framework and cannot be delegated to something that a junior ER Officer does, when he has some free time.

Employee Relations is in fact the foundation on which the function must be built. It is in fact the window through which we can see the world in which people live and work. We cannot get to work with that window closed.

What we need quite urgently is therefore an Employee Relations culture. A culture where everyone in the organisation, CEO downwards, engages with employees and does not treat employees as a mere input in the pursuit of profit.

The tools, techniques and methods might be and should be modern, but the approach should be the very same.

It is gratifying to note that many of the HR heads of large BPOs are taking their Employee Relations roles very seriously and setting good examples. They mingle with employees, walk around, work in night shifts and make themselves accessible.

These are good indications and we hope that their good work motivates others to follow.

There are five important actions that come to our mind in making this a reality.

Training for people management

The first and most urgent task is to ensure that Line Managers are NEVER EVER assigned people management responsibilities without preparation and training.

Even in our own consulting experience, we have realised that unless we have invested in creating the skills, our programmes and systems do not serve their purpose because managers just do not know how to work with them or why they should.

Putting the pride back in people engagement

Engaging with people is not seen as attractive today. We need to get pride back into this job.

The CEO and his team can play a critical role in doing this.

Learning about the business, being mentored by a Line Manager, being included in work unit activities and sharing critical information creates a sense of belonging for the HR Manager and encourages him to invest his time. The HR Manager naturally gravitates towards the most welcoming Line Manager!

The title, the positioning within the organisation and the visibility can all make the difference.

Taking the load out of people management tasks

It would be useful to take away the administrative burden related to people management from both the Line Manager and the HR Manager. Not just technology or convoluted outsourcing arrangements, but just the simple old-fashioned solution of having adequate support staff can quite often make a big difference!

A decent headcount for the HR team is a sound investment for peace of mind.

Setting the expectations right in the educational institutions

Aspiring HR professionals need help in understanding the various roles and the most appropriate career paths.

They also need practical skills that will help them become effective in ER roles. They must know how to deal with layoffs and separations. They must also know how to deal with grievances about sexual harassment. Equally important, they need to know how to introduce changes in employee working conditions and so on or counselling employees on simple issues.

They would do well to learn how to conduct communication meetings and implement welfare initiatives.

Adequate focus at the educational institutes will motivate HR professionals to do the role with joy.

Experiencing the Moments of Truth

There is nothing to replace the experience of doing what the workman does and gaining deep insights from that experience.

Work on the shop floor, visit the field and make sales calls, stack on the retail shelves, mop the floors, sell movie tickets, take calls in the call centre, or just be with them.

Finally, if you need to do all this, you need the time and the inclination.

There will be a hundred mails in your inbox, several missed calls on your mobile and dozens of messages in your voice mail.

You need to make the choice ….

looking back

Have you ever been part of an event where all the 62 present were not just participants but Chief Guests and co-authors?

An event where everyone from CEOs & business heads to students got together to debate a topic close to their hearts?

An event designed with an inherently chaotic structure to give maximum flexibility to all participants to say what they wanted?

An event where people shared personal stories and experiences with strangers with passion and honesty? An event where all co-authors shared equally and learned equally?

An event that ended with a group photograph so they could capture the memories they created?

An event after which many wrote back asking if there was any way they could further contribute to the theme of the event?

Well, it happened on September 6, 2003.

"Employment 2010- a participative search event" was organised by totus consulting and attended by a select group of 62 co-authors representing all stakeholders of employment. The objective of the event was to search for the mega-trends that would characterise the future of employment in India. During the event, the co-authors validated the 7 mega-trends that emerged through totus' research:

1. A new employment structure and the rise of powerful intermediaries
2. Employers & HR professionals with the values of the post-liberalisation era
3. The no-frills Employee Value Proposition
4. Learning in a privatised world of education
5. Work-life balance in complete disarray
6. A society unprepared for women at work
7. The heightened concern for career longevity for the 45+

Since the purpose of the event was to collectively search for the future, the event had to have minimal structure good enough to facilitate sharing, creativity and diversity while at the same time not losing focus and direction!

After the research findings were presented, the 62 co-authors chose 2 of the 7 trends that were closest to their heart. They then formed 7 smaller groups based on their choices, with each group discussing a trend in detail. Within these small groups, they validated the research, discussed the critical implications of the trends and evolved strategies that could be collectively pursued to create a preferred future. Ideas were generated through mind mapping, brainstorming, voice cards, examples, incidents and personal sharing. Each group had a facilitator who managed the boundaries of the discussion and helped build consensus. The facilitators later presented their group's deliberations in the open plenary, where all the co-authors could contribute.

What made the event truly unique was the voluntarism- indeed, the passion- with which the participants came together to shape the future. The whole-heartedness with which everyone gave themselves to the event first surprised us, then deeply touched us, and now continues to inspire us. The seriousness with which they grappled with the theme to come up with workable strategies has made us all the more determined to continue & complete the work we started. To this end, we are in the process of collating all the experiences, thoughts and insights that were shared at Employment 2010. We are also speaking with experts in certain key areas like education, work-life balance, employee rights, women issues and so on.

All this will culminate in the form of a book we hope to publish in early 2004!

If you would like to read our detailed research findings, please visit our website **www.totusconsulting.com** and download the PDF document. If you would like to know more about the event and the process, please do get in touch with us.

If you would like to get involved with our research or have any views or interesting information on the topics we are researching, do mail us at tellus@totusconsulting.com and we'll get in touch with you immediately.

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small group discussion

co-authors of
Employment 2010

open plenary session

about totus

We are a specialist HR consulting firm that partners with organisations by designing HR solutions that meet their business needs. Using our expertise in conceptualising, designing and implementing end-to-end HR solutions in a variety of business contexts, we help organisations harness their potential and manage their growth. Thought leadership and implementation excellence are the two pillars on which totus builds its solutions.

HR@work

This core end-to-end offering from totus addresses the needs of the following clearly defined customer groups:

◙ **Interim support for start-ups:**
totus has the expertise in providing interim HR support to start-ups of any size and complexity.

◙ **Institutionalisation support for SMEs, Professional Entrepreneurs and Family Businesses:**
totus has been working closely with CEOs of SMEs, entrepreneurs & business owners to provide them strategic and operational solutions meant to help institutionalise their HR and organisation building processes.

◙ **Improvement support for all Organisations:**
totus has been working with the CEOs of a wide variety and size of organisations to assist them in their organisational restructuring, change management and performance improvement efforts.

An HR@work engagement would typically last from three to twelve months depending on the complexity involved and the maturity of existing systems. The scope is highly customized to meet the organisations's needs and covers a wide spectrum of human resource initiatives including

◙ Organisation Design	◙ Workforce Management	◙ Compensation & Benefits
◙ Service Quality	◙ Performance Management	◙ Career Development Systems
◙ Staffing	◙ Job Design and Capabilities	◙ HR Function Development

Learning@work

Learning@work is totus consulting's learning solution and includes customised leadership development programs, top management workshops for building consensus on a variety of change management efforts and coaching programs to enrich people management styles. totus specialises in designing industry specific learning systems to facilitate multi-location distributed learning

1 to1 Facilitation

"1 to1 Facilitation" is a Coaching solution designed to meet the need of small business owners, People Managers and Senior Executives. "1 to1 Facilitation" is a collaborative alliance between a coach/facilitator and an individual to help the individual establish and clarify purpose and goals and to develop a plan of action to achieve the goals. "1 to1 Facilitation" can be used to address a variety of performance improvement needs. Small business owners can use "1 to1 Facilitation" to help grow their business, People Managers can use it to enhance their people management capabilities and Senior Executives to acquire critical skills needed for their career development.

Essense - Employee Survey & Sensing Solutions

◙ **Employee Surveys**
Surveys are now used as a regular system of "listening to employees" to understand their views, perceptions, expectations and levels of satisfaction, commitment and pride. totus designs and implements customised employee survey solutions to meet the specific "listening" needs of the client organisation.

◙ **360 degree feedback systems**
Strong behavioral capabilities and not merely functional mastery is recognised and accepted as critical to develop and demonstrate leadership in organisations today. More and more organisations are beginning to link career progression to the acquisition and demonstration of behavioral capabilities.
totus designs and implements 360 degree feedback systems to help employees understand where they stand on these capabilities. By creating the internal competence to handle the feedback process, totus helps improve levels of openness, collaboration and supporting behaviour in its client organisations. Beyond system development, totus efforts include training employees to give and receive feedback in a climate of openness.

totus has the capability to deliver these surveys on paper and on-line.

totus consulting services (p) limited

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